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205755
*****CAR-RT LOT**C-020
DR. GERALYN E. STEPHENS
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
5425 GULLEN MALL # 273
DETROIT MI 48202-3905
000308
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246411
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An Interview with Geralyn Stephens



PHOTO COURTESY OF RASHEDA K. WILLIAMS

Geralyn Stephens, an ACTE member and a professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, won the 2012 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Exemplary Course Design. Awarded annually, it is given to individuals who develop innovative and cutting-edge courses that represent the best in technology and learning.

ACTE: You won the Blackboard Catalyst Award for Exemplary Course Design for your course “History and Principles of Career and Technical Education.” Tell us about how you came up with this course and what it’s all about.

GS: The Blackboard Catalyst Award for the Exemplary Course Program (ECP) recognizes course creators whose courses demonstrate best practices in four major areas: Course Design, Interaction &

Collaboration, Assessment and Learner Support. The winning course is the first career and technical education (CTE) course recognized by the program since its inception. The course, CTE 6010—History and Principles of Career and Technical Education is a requirement for Wayne State University’s online Master of Education in Career and Technical Education degree program and has been delivered in an online format since 1997. This course was selected as an entry because it has been so well received by students throughout the years. (For more information, see www.coe.wayne.edu/ted/career-tech/med/overview.php.)

ACTE: What are the principles of CTE taught in your course?

GS: The course placed emphasis on the principles formulated by Dr. Melvin Miller in his book, *Principles and a Philosophy for Vocational Education*, written in 1985. In order to provide students with substantive information and relevance, a course assignment involved updating Miller’s 25 principles with more current definitions and examples of practice. Students also examine the legislative, social and political factors that influenced the direction of CTE in American secondary schools since its formal inception. The Blackboard Catalyst Award recognized how well the course management system (CMS) provided students with opportunities to collaborate.

ACTE: What did you discover about CTE that you didn’t know before preparing this course?

GS: One of the course projects explores Booker T. Washington’s influence and philosophies as they relate to the field of

teaching in CTE. Through the required text, *Up from Slavery*, students are introduced to Washington and examine his principles and philosophies, which are easily incorporated into CTE classrooms today.

Students in the course are practicing CTE teachers. They were able to share with their classmates how they planned to modify their instruction and student engagement activities based upon the influences from the text and the interaction with their peers. This summer session course included assignments that provided students with opportunities to discuss Washington’s strategies and techniques for industry-driven instruction, program development and fund-raising—all of which continue to be challenges for CTE programs today. This resulted in students formulating detailed instructional plans, fund-raising and other program support activities to be implemented in their schools and classrooms when they returned to work in the fall. This was important because it further supports the need for online courses to include activities that are immediately applicable to students’ lives.

To provide more of these experiences, I plan to modify the online course to include real-life applications of the other assignments. For example, there is a writing assignment related to CTE legislation. In a future assignment, this may be modified to include learning more about the local and state factors which influence the dissemination of Perkins Added-cost funds.

ACTE: Is this course solely theoretical? Are there any practical, hands-on aspects of the course for your students?

GS: Students—most often practicing CTE classroom teachers—engage in meaningful collaborative activities which provide them with resources that might be immediately implemented in their CTE classrooms. This is evident in the course wiki that was recognized as exemplary practice by the Blackboard ECP reviewers. It has been made public and can be previewed at www.cte-wsu.wikispaces.com.

ACTE: What makes your course “innovative and exciting?”

GS: Student evaluations of the course indicated the course was well organized and stimulating. They felt that web-based resources like webinars, podcasts and the infusion of Web 2.0 tools were well utilized in the course. The Blackboard Catalyst Award for the online course recognized that I infused best practices in online exemplary course design throughout the duration of the term.

The course is interactive and provides students with practical collaborative experiences. The course is embedded with numerous reflective activities, which were also recognized as exemplary practice by the Blackboard ECP reviewers. For example, there were collaborative discussion-board assignments related to the *Up From Slavery* textbook. Students articulated how the readings influenced their original thinking or how it changed their understanding or position on a related topic. Then, their peers shared their reactions or feedback to help further expand the conversation. Such activities provided students with opportunities to reflect upon their own teaching philosophies. Often, students are inspired to enhance their classroom practices with their renewed insight. These goals and visions can be immediately embedded in their secondary CTE courses, no matter what content area.

ACTE: What advice would you give to teachers?

GS: Ubiquitous teaching and learning environments are here to stay! It is

important for CTE teachers to embrace the technology and learn to maximize the resources to engage all students. In this online course, I wanted to ensure that we not only covered the content, but also that students were exposed to online tools that could be used in their classrooms. We used discussion boards, wikis, webinars and podcasts as learning tools in each course project. The textbook was also available from the free library! It is important that web-based resources be incorporated into the classroom at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Remember, elementary students today are using the tools regularly in their homes and classrooms.

ACTE: What do you want your legacy to be?

GS: I began teaching online in 1997. At that time, it was new and few educators could imagine how it would develop over the years. My next goal was to master the new instructional delivery medium: teaching using an internet-based course management system. Last year, I was a finalist (second place) for the 2011 Sloan-C Award for Excellence in Online Teaching in the individual category. This year, when I received the Blackboard Catalyst Award, I had reached that pinnacle of becoming a master online instructor. Now, my goal is to work with other CTE professionals to continue building courses that meet or exceed online course-development standards. **T**

Explore More

To preview a short video of the winning course, please visit: www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Learn/Resources/Community-Programs/Meet-Your-Peers/Catalyst-Awards.aspx.

To learn more about the Blackboard Exemplary Course program, visit www.blackboard.com/Platforms/Learn/Resources/Community-Programs/Meet-Your-Peers/Catalyst-Awards.aspx. I may also be contacted at ad9472@wayne.edu for assistance with the process.



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Association for Career and Technical Education
1410 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314
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